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PARK SYSTEM OF ESSEX COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

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The Essex County park system was the first undertaking wholly under county initiative and control. The plan involved at the outset a dual method of administration: a special commission for selecting the parks, their development and future regulation, while the financing of the enterprise was left with the regularly constituted county authorities. In recent years we have become familiar with commissions for local parks, but I have not been able to learn that any similar county undertaking was in existence in 1894, at the time of the inauguration of this scheme.

The movement in favor of parks and recreation grounds was accentuated by the rapid growth of Newark and other contiguous cities and towns within the county. While this interest in parks and other improvements was quite generally diffused at the inception of the county park plans, it was largely confined to individuals. The realization of this ideal was also badly hampered from the fact so generally prevalent in this country, that the men most competent to deal with such questions were too deeply engrossed in their private affairs.

The city of Newark had made a commendable effort from 1867 to 1871 to secure a public park. The legislature, in April, 1867, authorized a commission of twenty-six members to select and locate grounds for that purpose. The subsequent location of but one park in the northern part of the city resulted in rival claims being urged for the southern section, which so complicated the situation through jealousies and the spirit of sectionalism as to prevent further action either by the legislature or by the city authorities.

In 1892 a report of the Newark Board of Trade, favoring the immediate acquisition of parks, was well received, but nothing further came of it. In January, 1894, the plan for a county park system was launched, and there was immediate and generous response from every city, town and borough in the county. The victory was easily won because the plan proposed was simple,

direct and practicable. It was readily understood, and was susceptible of immediate and effective execution.

The suggestion for this plan was brought out at a dinner in Orange, January 3, 1894. A meeting was soon after arranged at the Board of Trade rooms in Newark. The park committees from Orange and Newark were present and the plan was unanimously approved. The late A. Q. Keasbey and the writer were then appointed a sub-committee to prepare a bill for the legislature, embodying the features of the plan. This draft of the bill was promptly approved by the committees at a meeting held April 25, 1894, and the same day transmitted to Trenton for introduction into the senate. It was passed by both houses with hardly a dissenting vote, and on May 8th, within two weeks after its introduction, was approved by the governor.

The provisions of this law were very simple. The presiding county judge was authorized to appoint a commission of five persons for the term of two years to "consider the advisability of laying out ample open spaces for the use of the public . . . in such county," with "authority to make maps and plans of such spaces, and to collect such other information in relation thereto as the said board may deem expedient;" and to "make a report in writing of a comprehensive plan for laying out, acquiring and maintaining such open spaces." The commission was also authorized to employ assistants, and to be reimbursed for actual traveling expenses incurred "in the discharge of their duties." The total expenditures were limited in the act to ten thousand dollars. The payment was to be provided by the board of freeholders—in New Jersey the county governing board—in the county tax levy in the usual manner. The commission was appointed June 18th, two members from Newark, one from Orange, one from South Orange, and one from Belleville. The judge in making the appointments referred to the "great public interest in the subject, pro and con, and mainly favorable to it," and considered it his "duty to appoint men who are so favorable to this enterprise and so desirous that it should be executed that they will be judicious enough to make such recommendations as will be approved by the public, so that the work will be finally accomplished." Up to this time no political pressure or other scheming influences had been active.

It was my privilege to serve as an official and member of the

first commission. The work of the board went rapidly forward. Immediately after organization the commission got in touch with other park boards in this country and in Europe and the various governing boards of the county, inviting suggestions and "co-operation in according fair consideration to every portion of the district." Some of the suggestions were practical, others visionary, but all bore the imprint of good-will. Some of the real estate speculators "cast an anchor to windward," and the commission discovered that in the aggregate of the recommendations a large portion of the county was well adapted to park uses. This led to the decision soon afterward as to holding the meetings of the board in executive session while the location of the parks might be under consideration—a plan still in vogue, which gives the meetings of the commission a star chamber close-corporation atmosphere. Landscape architects were employed, and each was requested to indicate on a map the locations of such parks and connecting parkways as in his judgment would provide the best park system that could be devised. The compensation was a fixed fee, expenses allowed, and it was understood that the designer of the most acceptable plan would properly hold an advance position for future engagement should the plan or plans be later carried out. Thus excellent expert counsel was obtained at the reasonable cost of \$2,372.

In some of the more important features all of the recommendations of the landscape architects agreed, and they are now parts of the park system. The commissioners with these reports and maps before them personally visited every section of the county.

The work of the commission during the summer and autumn of 1894 was pushed rapidly forward. By December counsel was appointed to assist in preparing a charter for a succeeding permanent commission. On April 19, 1895, the commission met for the last time. Its work had been completed in ten months. Of the \$10,000 appropriated, but \$4,474 had been expended.

The proposal that led to the establishment of the first commission contained the recommendation "that the commission be non-partisan, its members selected for fitness, with the sole object of devising the very best scheme for a system of parks that is practicable for the entire district." This recommendation, perhaps, appealed more strongly to the electorate and to the people generally than any of the other features of the plan. Indeed, I look upon the

immediate success of the plan both in the county and in the legislature as due very largely to this, the third feature of the original proposal.

The act creating the second commission was approved March 5th, and became Chapter cxi of the New Jersey laws of 1895. The bill provided for a commission of five members to be appointed, as was the first commission, by the presiding county judge, carried with it an appropriation of \$2,500,000 of county funds, without reference to local assessments for park benefits, and a referendum clause, submitting the act to the county electorate to determine whether the law should become operative. The act passed both assembly and senate without a dissenting vote.

At the special election, April 9th, following, the majority in favor of the adoption of the law was 8,321. In Newark the vote was 11,853 for and 9,330 against the bill. In other communities the majority for it was much larger. It was then that political forces and special interests, always having a keen eye for the main chance, "got busy." Specious claims were adroitly and in the usual subrosa manner brought to the attention of the judge to show why the men who had previously been selected, as the public evidently understood for reasons of fitness, and whose record in the first commission had been everywhere approved, should not be reappointed. It was urged that other men more to the liking of certain interests should be selected. Sectional interests, which, as already indicated, had totally defeated one Newark park undertaking, were put forward to assist in accomplishing the desired result. The judge yielded to this pressure and but three of the commissioners were reappointed. Of the two new members, one was an active ambitious politician, then, as since, chairman of the State Republican Committee. The other new member was an old-time thorough partisan, rich and eminently respectable, who made no pretense of possessing any practical knowledge whatever of public parks. Neither of these appointees had had anything whatever to do with the formulative plans or the work of the first commission. Both were actively identified with large corporate interests centering in Newark.

The two new commissioners were, by the judge's request, installed as officers of the new commission. Moreover, it was insisted by the new officials, almost immediately after organization, that a political worker, whose inefficiency as an attorney in the

public sinecure positions that he had held for years had become notorious, must be appointed counsel to the commission at a munificent salary.

The injection of these new members into the commission and their selection as its officers, changed in a large measure its plans, and very naturally its scope and policy. The pledges made by the first commission to the public as to the limits of expenditure for the park system and as to the execution of the park plans agreed upon for the whole county, including the two necessary parkways for connecting the larger parks, were not recognized as binding upon the new members. They were there, as one of them expressed it, "to spend the \$2,500,000 as they pleased, without regard to what the former commission may have said or done." Instead of proceeding toward the development of the park system for the county as a whole, a piece-meal policy was adopted of locating here and there a park without reference to the connecting parkways. Some of the members, including myself, who had served on the first commission and had been reappointed, were most anxious that good faith should be kept with the public; but the changed policy was carried out and has since remained as the controlling method of procedure in the acquisition and development of the county parks.

Three important results have followed: (a) The parks have cost nearly six millions of dollars against an estimated cost of \$2,500,000, as announced by the first commission and pledged to the people at that time. (b) With all this expenditure, while we have fine parks and natural reservations, we have yet no connected park system. (c) The Public Service Corporation and other "considerations," financial and political, effectually turned over one of the vitally important connecting parkways to the perpetual use of the traction company. The other great parkway between the central Branch Brook Park in Newark and the Orange Mountain, while finally surrendered by the traction interests for a parkway, has never been adequately improved and has no connection under park control through to the mountain parks.

At the close of 1896, within fifteen months after the receipt of \$2,450,000 from the sale of county bonds, and when the park lands had been only partially acquired, the commission found that its financial limit had been practically reached. The legislature and

the electorate, however, voted more bonds, and the work went on. This process has now been several times repeated but with constantly decreasing majorities. The various issues of bonds for county park purposes now outstanding amount to \$5,800,000.

The contest between those contending for the public parkways and those favoring the Public Service Corporation, with its allied forces, was an aggressive one. For more than five years the battle raged. The courts, the various governing bodies, civic associations, and the newspapers were active in the campaign. Only the Park Commission appeared indifferent to the fate of its own plans. The traction forces were materially assisted by the Park Commission's own counsel. The final result was that the traction company secured a franchise for a part of the distance on Central Avenue, and the cars have since been running there as far as the Orange lines; while Park Avenue, the other intended parkway, was transferred to the "care, custody and control" of the Park Commission and the attempt to secure a franchise on that avenue abandoned. The cross section East Orange Parkway is now completed for a short distance, but as one terminus is on a narrow street and the other ends at the trolley tracks on Central Avenue, it is little used and has been chiefly beneficial to one of the commissioners appointed in 1895 who was a very large owner of the land through which the parkway was built.

There are now five principal parks in the Essex County System: the beautiful Branch Brook Park in Newark, of about three hundred acres, costing nearly \$3,000,000; Eagle Rock reservation along the crest of the Orange Mountain, of more than four hundred acres; the South Mountain reservation, of about twenty-five hundred acres; Weequalic Park and Lake, South Newark, of something like three hundred acres; Orange Park, of about fifty acres, and smaller local parks. The parks are well laid out and the improved ones are effectively treated with lawns and planting, and are kept in excellent condition. The low swamp lands, after suitable drainage, become most attractive as lawns and for border plantations.

When the park system was inaugurated in 1895, the county had a population of 300,000 and ratables of \$178,000,000, with a direct county indebtedness of only \$766,000. In some localities both population and ratables have since nearly or quite doubled,

and the parks are an added attraction, more and more appreciated as time goes on and the density of population increases.

Hudson County a few years ago followed the Essex County plan, and obtained from the legislature an amended charter for a county park commission. The law provides that the commission of four must consist of two members chosen from each of the leading political parties. This commission has received larger county appropriations, and is now acquiring and developing parks in Jersey City and other parts of Hudson County. The completion of the Hudson River transit tubes, and the rapid growth of land values indicate conclusively that the park movement both in Essex and Hudson counties began none too soon.

Whether an appointive or elective commission is preferable; where it is safest and best to lodge the appointing power under the former plan of park organization; and whether, by any known method of legislative or municipal creation, it is possible permanently to secure park officials selected wholly for fitness, are questions too large to be discussed here. Commissioners who work solely from motives of civic pride and public spirit sooner or later discover the same lurking influences directly inimical to the public weal that President Roosevelt had to contend with in Washington, and that Judge Lindsey faced in Denver.

The experience of Essex County should, however, not discourage those interested in securing public parks. The Palisade Park Commission, since its creation in 1900, has accomplished excellent results; it has inspired public confidence, and has secured magnificent bequests. What it has done and is doing augurs well for the future.